Response to W. Clark Gilpin’s Commentary “The Letter from Prison in Christian History and Theology”

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Thomas More’s been framed. Historians sometimes stretch his career between two cells: one, at its start, in the London Charterhouse he frequented while he studied law, lectured on Augustine’s City of God, and contemplated joining the Carthusians, and a second, at its close, in the Tower awaiting execution. The format fits, and the claim that occasionally accompanies it is quite plausible, namely, that More, in the end, got what he always wanted. He had relinquished the first cell to serve his city and, later, his king, but he missed the monastery and subsequently found in prison the solitude to ponder, pray, write, and serve, more exclusively, his church. He is not quite played that way in Bolt’s Man for All Seasons, though to read More’s Tower works is to glimpse a fugitive from the world’s distractions, grateful for the time and for a suitable space to stay on message. W. Clark Gilpin’s gift here is to make “the persistent features” of that message and of many others originating under similar circumstances distinctive and revealing of more than the sentiments of one or another incarcerated author. The convicts doing time in this Web Forum include outspoken puritans who irritated Queen Elizabeth’s diocesan officials but also the “popish dregs” who incensed those puritans. It’s quite a rogues’ and reformers’ gallery, containing few, truth be told, who enjoyed More’s privacy. Squalid conditions cost some their lives. Some were packed together, preaching at each other. Some looked to console their comrades. Some self-consciously addressed posterity. But all Clark’s convicts wrote what became “highly charged” and influential public documents.

Clark “step[s] back from the shifting political and cultural contexts” to compose a faithful, probing, useful report of his texts. Nonetheless, with a single paragraph, he strikingly summarizes what transpired “during the 170 years of English history” that interest him and alludes to the important issue of influence.
They were eventful years. Citizens then witnessed what our colleague John Headley calls “the unraveling of a hierarchically organized unity into a community . . . founded upon the coexistence of differing churches apparently de-fanged by religious pluralism, doctrinal indifference, disestablishment, and tolerance.” How did prison letters contribute to the unraveling or rewinding? How might one document positive effects, knowing that correspondence could be abusive? Martyrs regularly professed loyalty to the crown about to kill them – conventional gallows piety – yet pilloried the “vengeful prelates” who had summoned the secular arm to do its worst. Prisoners of conscience, in other words, could be extremely intolerant of the faiths they were dying to oppose.

No doubt, letters from prison, as Clark says, “played a crucial role in the debate over religious toleration during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,” yet, somewhat surprisingly, articulate prisoners of conscience were not always on the side of conscience, pluralism, tolerance, and disestablishment. But, without exception, they were adversaries of religious indifference. Their situations, along with the substance and tone of their correspondence, gave what they wrote “a prophetic edge” and urgency. Richard Greenham of Dry Drayton, less than a day from Cambridge by slow horse, complained after a long and distinguished ministry, during which several of the colleges’ best preachers apprenticed with him, that parishioners seldom listened attentively and to good effect. But the admirers of late Tudor confessors, Barrow and Greenwood, would take notice of what they heard and read from their heroes. Near death orations grabbed attention.

Clark takes up their themes as he takes on their genre. He illustrates wonderfully well how “the rhetorical power of the prison letter came from interweaving the prisoner’s personal narrative with the grand narrative of Christian martyrdom.” On both sides of the confessional divide, persecution and heroism were staged as parts of “the grand drama of salvation history as a whole.” Suffering serves as evidence of the injustice of an enemy’s cause as well as “certification of [one’s] religious authenticity” and “an act of solidarity with
community members under threat.” John Foxe preferred exile to prison during the Marian period yet was an assiduous collector of depositions, prison interrogations, and eyewitness reports of executions, which he wove into his Acts and Monuments, required reading for generations of reformers. Jesuit letters circulated to similar effect. Ordeals of imprisoned and martyred brothers decorated the refectories, where new waves of English seminarians prepared for repatriation and execution. Still, the place of letters from prison among all this martyr memorabilia raises a question. How and why did authorities fail to contain the influence of inspiring correspondence? How could they have underestimated the power of their prisoners’ words, of the “interweaving” Clark now reports? Ostensibly, they bullied and confined dissenters to keep them quiet or, at least, to limit their reach. It seems likely that authorities would have wanted as well to limit their prisoners’ remarks. The drama of words breaking out of prison should be worth telling nearly as often as it occurred.

Let students of censorship sniff out the secret presses and circumstances that made for great escapes. Clark concentrates on the escapees, the texts – their “frames of reference,” “common tropes,” personal testimonies, and “grand narratives.” He retrieves their rhetorical power, a power attested today by the popularity of Brad Gregory’s recent Salvation at Stake (1999), which, like Clark’s paper, catches “those who prayed and prepared in prison before stepping to the stake or scaffold.” Yet this month’s Forum has a territorially more specific interest than that of Gregory’s survey and greater concern for the way prison letters “perpetuate the ministry of their authors.” The letters now look to have been relics for a logocentric age. As relics, they were, concretely what was left of those who composed them, proofs of their formidable presence as well as “testimon[ies] of the absolute,” “organizing [theological] ideas within a literary form of direct address to the reader.” If so, this suggests questions more directly relevant to Clark’s topic than that of censorship.

How effectively did imprisoned theologians, facing their grim fate, reconcile the injustices that put them behind bars with God’s justice and power?
Most of them seem to have transcended self-pity, though, as Clark comments, they “believe[d] themselves to be unjustly incarcerated for their fidelity to conscience and religious principle.” Nonetheless, the injustice had somehow to be folded into the predestinarian theologies of reformers or the providentialism that Catholics and Protestants shared. Stressing continuities between late medieval and early modern religious thought as well as theology’s accommodations to the pervasive “popular providentialism,” historians now allow that sixteenth-century thinking about divine sovereignty was rather homologous. Alexandra Walsham’s study, *Providence in Early Modern England* (1999), documents as much; Peter Lake’s suggestive early chapters in *Antichrist’s Lewd Hat* (2002) take theology to Death Row. Clark gets us there as well, where probably each instance will reveal a slightly different reconciliation between personal tragedy and divine triumph. Henry Barrow wonders how this miscarriage of justice could be happening, how he, one of the queen’s most devoted subjects, could be so miserably confined, saved from death only to be resentenced. Yet he struggles to make sense of his misery and achieves what Clark calls his “incorporation into the lineage of religious suffering.” Barrow, for one, raises “his speech beyond the political fray,” pairing the personal with the providential under trying circumstances.

This month’s Web Forum, then, is a preview of what will surely be an unforgettable study of the role religious commitments play in social history and, inasmuch as Clark has documents that code resentment along with commitment, self-justification as well as soteriology, his must become an intriguing study of the way social history – specifically, the social intolerance reflected in punitive policy and practice – fixes religious commitment, making it more rather than less fervent and dangerous. There’s courage and heroism aplenty in all this, to be sure, but I wonder if there may be a lesson here as well for those who cherish the freedom of religious expression, admire fortitude, yet fear fanaticism.